

California's delegation in Congress has long been a model of dysfunctional partisanship. Led by thoroughly liberal Democrats on one side and staunch conservative Republicans on the other, California's House and Senate members rarely meet in one room, never mind work together for the state's interests. Last week, for example, when Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger asked for help in seeking federal loan guarantees for the state's borrowing, the congressional delegation promptly split in its customary way: Democrats were strongly in favor, Republicans vigorously opposed.

But one issue, you'll be glad to learn, has united Southern California's representatives in Washington: an airplane factory in Long Beach. That's where Boeing assembles the C-17, the long-haul workhorse of the Air Force transport fleet.

For three years, the Pentagon has said it doesn't want any more C-17s; the 205 planes it has already bought are all the nation needs, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates believes. Even the Air Force says it doesn't want any more. "Too much aluminum is almost as bad as not enough," Gen. Norton A. Schwartz, the chief of staff, has said.

Who's insisting that we buy more of the big planes at roughly \$276 million a copy? A strange bipartisan coalition of almost every California incumbent on Capitol Hill -- from Sen. Barbara Boxer, an antiwar liberal, to Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-Huntington Beach), a Reaganite conservative.

Working with members of Congress from 42 other states where C-17 components are made, and helped by lobbying from Boeing and the machinists union, the Californians have won commitments from congressional leaders for \$2.2 billion to pay for eight more C-17s -- and they hope to add even more in the fall.

The reason is simple: jobs. The Long Beach plant employs about 5,000 people, and those jobs would probably move away if the Pentagon phased out the C-17 as it wants to. The jobs wouldn't be lost from the U.S. economy; the government would spend the money somewhere else. But the jobs would probably leave Long Beach, and that's what California's congressional delegation has been working to prevent.

The legislators rarely put it that way, of course; they say their support for the C-17 is based on its other valuable qualities. Rohrabacher, a defense hawk and an aerospace expert, says he thinks the Air Force is simply wrong. Wars in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, he argues, mean we need more transport planes, not fewer. The fact that the Boeing plant is a mile or so from his district is beside the point. "If it was not built in California, I'd still be in favor of it," he said.

Boxer's reasoning is a little more complicated. "The C-17 is an indispensable part of our humanitarian effort around the world," she told me. "It's a way to evacuate wounded soldiers. It's a way to bring food where it's needed."

But Boxer also supported continued production of the F-22, a massively expensive fighter jet (\$142 million each) whose only humanitarian mission was the creation of jobs in California, Georgia and other states. Against all odds, Gates succeeded this year in ending the F-22 program -- mostly by promising its maker, Lockheed Martin, that the Pentagon would buy more of the company's new F-35 fighters instead.

Asked why she supported the F-22, Boxer shrugged. "You have an Air Force, you need to have planes," she said. "I want the best planes you can have."

Boxer's relentless focus on local interests will be central to her bid for a fourth term next year. She's not resoundingly popular across the state; a Field Poll in March found Californians evenly split on whether they want her to keep her seat, 42% to 43%. So she knows she needs to reach beyond her liberal base to keep her job.

She likes to point out instances in which she has worked with conservative Republicans: allowing airline pilots to carry guns, for example, and seeking tax breaks for Silicon Valley firms. She has won early endorsements from several technology executives, including Cisco CEO John Chambers, a nominal Republican. (His announcement was a shot across the bow at former Hewlett-Packard CEO Carly Fiorina, who may seek the Republican nomination; despite her resume, Silicon Valley will still be mostly Democratic.)

Amid all this old-fashioned politics, spare a thought for the one Southern California congressman who was brave enough to oppose building more C-17s: Rep. John Campbell (R-Irvine). "I don't think it's right to support something that's built in your district to the detriment

of the national interest," he told me. "It leads to overspending and deficits and, well, corruption.

"I'm sure I'll hear from Boeing about this. I realize it's an uphill battle. But at some point we have to decide that waste is waste," he said. "All I know is that the Air Force believes more of these planes are unnecessary. ... Dana and I just disagree about that."

Luckily for Campbell, his affluent district at the southern end of Orange County is a long way from the factories of Long Beach. His constituents probably include more fiscal conservatives than machinists. But his voice is a lonely one in California's Republican caucus.

"I think it would help us get the majority back if we were more consistent about this," he argued.

In the long run, Campbell may be right. But in a recession, voters may well prize jobs over consistency.

At this point, Boxer looks like a good bet to keep her job -- along with those 5,000 Boeing employees assembling C-17 airplanes in Long Beach.